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A. Good and Bad

In traditional China the prevailing belief was that man was inherently good and that socially harmful behavior occurred only when men lacked guidance or were placed in adverse circumstances. For example, if the ruler of the state or his officials or the father of the family failed to provide for the basic physical needs of individuals, their dependents were likely to rebel. Or if those in authority failed to provide instruction, particularly if they failed to set an example in conduct, then those subordinate to them would have no guideposts to the good and would fall into evil ways.

Bad conduct was not, as in the West, violation of the laws of God but deviation from the age-old norms of acceptable social behavior. Specifically, behavior was categorized as "bad" if it went against such prescribed norms as the following: (1) hsiao, filial submission to fathers and elders; (2) chung, loyal and submissive devotion to superiors; (3) hsin, good faith among friends and associates; (4) jen, benevolence or fellow-feeling which should inform all social relationships; (5) i, righteousness in one's dealings with others; (6) li [good form) accepted procedures in human relations; (7) lien, integrity; and (8) ch'ih, sense of shame.

[footnote No. 3 continued]
1950, pp. 16-17. For Mao, of course, the term means the ultimate world-wide Communist utopia.

4. For example, as late as 1941-43, one anthropologist found that in rural Yunan the traditional value of hsiao (filial submission) was still, as it had been for centuries, "the foundation stone...of social organization,...the measuring stick of all behavior and of the worth of the individual.

The laws of imperial China provided heavy punishments for violations of these norms; the most heinous crimes were those against hsiao, filial submission. Yet the ideal in the application of law was not blindfold justice but punishment administered with due regard for "human feelings" [jen-ching] and for the specific circumstances sourrounding the crime. This attitude is illustrated in the old proverb: "There is one thing worse than a dishonest official and that is an honest official," which expresses disapproval of a rigorous enforcement of rules and regulations, of an enforcement that fails to take in account "human feelings."[5] The criteria for judging behavior as good or bad were therefore neither religious nor legalistic, but were the prevailing norms in the community, the customary practices sanctioned by tradition and ratified by a high degree of community consensus.

In traditional China goodness could be cultivated through practice, study, and contemplation. Confucianism held that the path to goodness was open to all, that those who attained a high order of goodness should be a moral elite, a group of exemplars for others. This moral elite was also, in Confucian theory, the group which should hold and exercise political power and enjoy the rewards of status and wealth. This notion sanctioned the long political dominance of the scholar-official.

5. Ruth Benzel and John Weakland, "An Anthropological Approach to Chinese Communism," Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures, New York, 1952, pp. 80-81. Hereafter cited as Bunzel-Weakland.

6. Liu Shao-ch'i, "The Training of the Communist Party Member," first presented as a speech in 1939; cf. translation in Boyd Compton, Mao's China, Seattle, 1952, p. 146.